



PAINWEST

Excellence in Pain Management

Ketamine Lozenges

What is ketamine?

Ketamine is a commonly used anaesthetic medication (used in both medical and veterinary practice).

How does ketamine work?

Once absorbed by your body, ketamine goes to your nerves, spinal cord, and brain. Here ketamine binds to the NMDA receptor (think of this as ketamine “key” slotting into the receptor “lock”). This dampens down the signals that nerves carry, and at high doses causes general anaesthesia.



Why is ketamine used for pain management?

At low doses (1/5th to 1/20th of doses that will cause you to be anaesthetized), ketamine can have a strong pain relief action. Intravenous ketamine is often used for a few days after surgery to help with pain relief. Long term use of ketamine for chronic pain (pain lasting for more than three months) is very rare, and is only considered for very difficult-to-treat nerve pain, and when all other alternative options have been exhausted.

What do I need to know about ketamine?

1. Ketamine is a known **drug of abuse**, being sold illegally “on the street” and used for its euphoric and psychedelic effects (causing a person to see, hear, smell, feel or taste things that aren’t there or are different from reality). People can, and do, get **addicted** to it.
2. The effect of ketamine can **diminish with ongoing use** (tolerance), and more of the medication may be needed to have the same effect.
3. Stopping ketamine abruptly after long term use can cause a **withdrawal reaction** (dependence), which can be very unpleasant.
4. Use of ketamine can be **unpleasant**, and can provoke hallucination (seeing things that aren’t there), dysphoria (feeling of badness, doom, “not right”), anxiety and panic. Some people that previously had a “bad trip” from ketamine can have unpleasant flashbacks later, even without using ketamine. Use of very high doses of ketamine (more than the directed amount) can be life threatening.
5. While we do not know enough about long term use of ketamine (because it is used so rarely), we have found out from those who abuse ketamine that **long term effects** include painful bladder, incontinence (loss of bladder control), ulceration (inner linings of bladder peeling off), and bladder cancer.

Ketamine and the law

Ketamine is licensed by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) of Australia as an anaesthetic medicine. The use of ketamine for any other reason, including pain relief, is considered “off label” (use outside of recognized indication/reason). This **does not mean that medically sanctioned ketamine use is unsafe or illegal**, only that this use is not officially recognized by the government.

Ketamine is a schedule 8 poison/controlled drug under Australian law, and is strictly regulated by the Medicines and Poisons Regulation Branch, Department of Health of Western Australia. It can only be prescribed by a specialist (such as a Pain Specialist), meaning that your GP cannot give repeats.

Any medical use of ketamine **must be recorded and signed off by the Department of Health**. If we think ketamine might be suitable for you, we will contact the Department of Health for an authority to prescribe.

As with other schedule 8 controlled drugs (including opioids), previous or current illicit substance use means the Department of Health will likely refuse applications for authority to prescribe ketamine or any other controlled drug.

Any suspicion that you may be using them in an unsafe manner (such as when you are addicted), or hoarding/seeking to sell them off, is taken seriously. This is to protect your health and wellbeing. We are obliged by law to report any suspicious activity to the health department.

How do I get and use it?

Ketamine in oral form can only be obtained from a compounding pharmacy. It is not a PBS subsidized medication, and cost can be significant (hundreds of dollars per month). It is given as a lozenge or wafer that can be dissolved (melt) under your tongue or in your cheek. Generally half to one lozenge is used at a time, one to many times a day; it generally starts working within 15 minutes and lasts for 3-6 hours.

How do I use it safely?

In general, **the stronger the pain medication, the worse the side effects**. We want to make sure that pain medications help you get the most out of your life. We also want to prevent/minimize the potential for these medications to harm you (with side effects and addiction).

We strongly advise that you use **as little ketamine as possible**, and for the **shortest amount of time**. Rather than using it simply for pain relief, use of ketamine **must result in your function improving** (i.e. you being able to do more things during your day).

After a period of time we may direct you to reduce your ketamine use gradually, with the view to ceasing them; this is to reduce and minimize the risk of long term harm of ketamine.

Please ask us if you have any questions about your medications, or are worried about taking them/side effects!